Penny Francis – interview transcript

Interviewer: Catriona Stephenson

31 December 2008

Actress. A Multitude of Sins; Ronnie Barker; costumes; dressing rooms; Equity; Derek Francis; Sir Peter Hall; Pygmalion; Peter Pan; puppetry; theatre training; touring; Two Loves I Have; Kenneth Tynan; weekly repertory; Emlyn Williams.

This transcript has been edited by the interviewee and thus differs in places from the recording.

CS: …How did you first become interested in the theatre?

PF: I… My parents were theatre mad, both of them. My father loved everything to do with stage management and lighting and all the technical things and my mother loved acting – they were amateurs. We lived in Calcutta in India and the two of them were leading lights of the amateur dramatic club of Calcutta and they did a lot of really… very good work there and during the war entertained masses of troops and… I just grew up loving theatre and seeing everything that I could – and it was quite clear that my parents would have no objection at all if I went on the stage... And so I did, I got a job as an ASM in a weekly rep – in 1950 was it or 49? Anyway, I'd had a year at university and my father challenged me more or less and said 'if I was really serious about theatre, I wouldn't be wasting my time, I'd be going straight on the stage', so I said 'Right – I'll show him!' and I got a job from The Stage – (in those days, you could get a job as an ASM from The Stage) and went off to a little place called Wellington in Shropshire and joined this tiny little… well, there were masses of them in those days, weekly rep, and it was a summer season… and I started being ASM, which meant being responsible for the props, helping backstage, holding the book, all those things, but after the – well, almost the first production, I was playing really nice parts, because I had a certain talent. I don't know how much talent I had, but I had a certain talent and the whole of the company - there were about eight of us I suppose - we all swapped different kinds of roles and played different kinds of parts and although I didn't get any of the others to help me collecting the props, we all mucked in more or less. And then from weekly rep in Wellington, I went to weekly rep in Swindon and at this time the London theatre was lively, but it was very much dominated by light comedy, tremendous amount of light comedy by authors like Hugh and Margaret Williams [because] the audiences were still suffering from the war and people still wanted a certain amount of escapism. So it wasn't altogether surprising, but bit by bit really superb, serious writers started to come on the scene and the Noel Coward, Hugh and Margaret Williams era ended in the fifties and poor old Noel Coward had a really, really bad series of years: having been at the top of the profession he then went into the wilderness for quite a long time, but he came

back! He came back in the sixties and he's now considered one of the all time greats of the British Theatre, which I'm very pleased about, because he's a sort of hero of mine and I partly talk the way I do because of my admiration for Noel Coward [laughs].

CS: [laughs]

PF: Anyway, the weekly rep continued into my second year on the stage in Lowestoft, which is in Suffolk isn't it? Where my parents decided to start a little weekly rep theatre, which lost them all their savings, but I had a ball... and then I got into touring and there was a number one tour... in a play by quite a well-known playwright called Rodney Ackland, in which I played a Cockney maid and I think that must have been one of my worst performances. In those days, most actors had no training at drama school. RADA existed and one or two others came on the scene quite soon afterwards, but most actors went into weekly rep as I did and learned their craft there. It wasn't the best of training because you got used to establishing a character very quickly and just playing it off the top of your head, because on Monday you had the read-through, on Tuesday you had to be dead-letter perfect for Act One, on Wednesday, you had to be dead-letter perfect for Act Two, Thursday the whole play and then you had the technical and dress rehearsals on Friday and a bit of Saturday, because there were always two performances on Saturday and then the new show would go into production on the Monday. So there wasn't very much time for analysis of the characters and the psychology and all of that, you just got it like that, made a decision on how you were going to look, how you were going to speak and went into it, so I had no voice training and I had no physical training.

CS: What sort of plays in weekly rep?

PF: Oh, they were, like I was saying, very light-weight plays on the whole. There were staples, which all the reps did. There was a play called George and Margaret, there was another play by Kenneth Horne called... oh what was it called? But they were all either light comedies or very superficial dramas. There was a play called The Paragon and a very famous actor who played Doolittle in the first film of Pygmalion - Wilfred Lawson - he came to play the lead in that. And he was a monumental drunk, [Laughing] which is why he descended from the heights of the West End into this little weekly rep.

CS: [laughs]

PF: But that was one of the few dramas that we did. I remember we did the Christmas Carol at Christmas in which I played at least five different parts… But mostly they were comedies, mostly… and in Swindon I remember having a wonderful part in a play called See How They Run,which is a farce, which is still being revived – one of the best farces ever written… Oh, The Corn is Green was a great staple, by Emlyn Williams – Emlyn Williams was a [leading] writer in those days. But this tour of A Multitude of Sins by Rodney Ackland was a real education, because we went to big, big, big theatres – huge theatres. In places like Glasgow and Streatham and Manchester and Cardiff and that was known as a number one tour. And everybody wanted to go, if they had to go on tour, they wanted a number one tour. But it was so interesting, that in nearly all these theatres, which were… kind of still, you know the big gilt and plush and red and gold

kinds of theatres, the accommodation for the actors was always appalling, absolutely appalling. Whoever designed the theatres had no thought at all for the actors and one was really sometimes very uncomfortable. I mean, it was the same, even in the Royal Opera House! I remember going backstage there in the late fifties and I couldn't believe the circumstances of the actors' dressing rooms. Quite apart from the fact that the actors might have had to climb three floors to get to their dressing rooms, they were pokey, down little corridors – it was awful! And really great stars were in them, like Margot Fontaine and Robert Helpmann and so when the government finally fed millions and millions and millions into refurbishing the Opera House in the... was it the eighties and nineties? I mean, it took a long time. I was not one of those people saying 'How dare they spend so much money...' - I said "hooray!" it was jolly-well about time, it really was. But I remember I went on from this tour to play panto in Wales, I think it was in Pontypridd and I played Will Scarlet and I had to slap my thigh in a time-honoured manner. But my breeches were bulging with paper tissues, because I had a streaming cold – and although when you go on stage the adrenalin takes away all illnesses – I mean, you know, you've got a broken leg, you carry on performing, because the adrenalin doesn't let you know – my husband broke his ankle on stage once and had to be dragged offstage by the same ankle, but he didn't feel anything until it was all over and it was the same – but a streaming cold would not be hidden! I just went on streaming on stage, I had to have tissues to mop my poor nose and this was because in Pontypridd there was no heating at all in the dressing rooms and no possibility of heating except for a little tiny live fire, which of course nobody was going to light. So we all went down with... pneumonia. I'm not sure that there are many improvements in some of these old theatres, I think the actors still have a bad time, but on the whole... it's interesting to remember that by the end of the nineteenth-century was the only time actors started to have any... status at all, I mean, you know, they were wandering players, vagabonds... the worst thing you could call a woman was a prostitute, and the second worst thing was an actress.

CS: How were you treated as a woman?

PF: Oh, no things had changed very much by the end of the forties…

CS: Yeah.

PF: I tell you, the war – both wars brought a hell of a lot of status to women and in general, I mean it brought them… It brought the vote to women after the first world war, but in the second world war there was so much theatre, theatre was so important and you had stars from Hollywood doing great things for the war effort, that just – you know, the situation of women was very much better. And in theatre in our weekly reps and amongst the actors, there was parity, there was absolutely no difference at all, there was no sexism at all that I ever came across.

CS: Yeah.

PF: In fact, as a breed, I find actors really delightful. They're usually highly intelligent. Quite a lot of them are mad about self-education and they go on educating themselves

in some hobby or some development or other, which is not anything to do with their theatre career, and there is never any racism or sexism or any of the petty things, they're not petty people on the whole. I once met an actor and he was a – quite a well known character actor. I won't name him, because you'd know him. He's dead now. Oh, maybe I will name him. It was the first Dr Who. It was a man called William Hartnell and he told a very dear friend of mine that 'he'd discovered that he was a Jew, but not to worry, because he didn't look like it and nobody would ever know!'... And everybody was so shocked, because you just don't meet it, you know?

CS: No.

PF: And anyway there are millions of Jews in the theatre business –

CS: Yeah. [laughs]

PF: [laughing] Too bad if you don't like them. Anyway, yeah I really like the acting community on the whole.

CS: So what did you go on to do after weekly rep then?

PF: Well, there was this tour that I was talking about and that of course was all the same, but I think I digressed at that point on the business of training, because what I needed more than anything for that tour, playing the same part, was some background in how to play comedy… and that is something that… you can't really be taught timing, I mean you either have the sense of timing or you don't. You can be taught how to place certain words and certain pauses, but I was desperately green. I didn't understand that in order to be funny on stage, you must never ever let on that you think you're funny. You've always got to play for serious. As soon as the audience thinks that you think you're being funny, you've lost them. And this part of the little cockney maid was – it was very well written, but I would have got a lot more laughs if I hadn't thought I was being funny and that would have taken really a mentor or somebody, you know to take me on one side and give me some coaching. So anyway, gradually the theatre schools started to come in and – not just the theatre schools, but actors who had had a degree and then gone to theatre schools – and now a lot of the theatre schools, like the one I work at, Central School of Speech and Drama, have university status and they give out degrees, but that's a fairly recent development, that's only in about the last 15 years. But anyway there was the touring and there was this pantomime, well I had a lot of fun, even if I was very cold. And then I think there were bits and pieces. I did a couple of tiny parts on television.

CS: What sort of TV shows were they?

PF: Plays. I was usually cast, because I was very dark – dark-haired…

CS: Yeah.

PF: …and quite dark eyes, usually cast for rather exotic parts, either – very often tarts, very often foreign maids. And then I think the next big thing was... big-ish, was playing a student - a university student - in one of the very first plays ever about lesbianism and it was about a tutor who was in love with one of the students.

CS: What year was this?

PF: And this was, must have been about 1952.

CS: Was there any opposition against the play?

PF: Well it was put up in a club, in the Arts Theatre Club.

CS: [Oh, OK]

PF: And this is how people got round this business of the censor, who had to see every script of every play before it could be licensed, it had to have a licence.

CS: Yes.

PF: And this play was by an American, a very famous American couple whose name I'm not going to be able to remember...

CS: [laughs]

PF: I believe a husband and wife, or a brother and sister, and it's a shame I can't remember, I've got the programme upstairs. And I had a tiny part, but it was lovely, because the big part was played by a very well-known actress at the time called Sonia Dresdel. And also playing a tiny part of a student was one Alec McCowen, who during rehearsals got an offer to do a much, much better part in another play.

CS: Oh?

PF: And he was allowed to go...

CS: [OK]

PF: …because he was comparatively easy to replace, because it was such a small part and it was such a wonderful opportunity; and the people and the man directing it, a man called Roy Rich, who was married to Brenda Bruce, who was a very well known actress at that time... he allowed Alec to go. And in the mean time, we played… the name of the play was Two Loves have I or Two Loves I have - it's a quote from a Shakespeare sonnet... and it was a very well-written play, very well-crafted and it was serious, but the censor wouldn't allow it.

CS: Why?

PF: It was in advance of its time and any reference to lesbianism was absolutely – well, even gay matters were still not discussed in the early fifties.

CS: How did actors feel about censorship at that time? Were you really against it?

PF: I'm ashamed to tell you that I had no strong feelings one way or another until I did this play, when I realised how good it was and we had the chance of transferring to the West End, if it hadn't been for the censor – and I think that already there were the beginnings of a rumbling against censorship, although it wasn't abolished until quite astonishingly late. Can you remember when it was abolished?

CS: I think '68.

PF: '68, so it's already about 15 years away.

CS: Yes.

PF: Ken Tynan had a lot to do with that. And we… well, I thought Ken Tynan was the greatest thing since sliced bread. I thought he was a fabulous theatre critic and he – there was a whole kind of movement that was coming out of the wartime escapism in theatre thing. And there was – the theatre was being taken more and more seriously. And I think that I was quite conscious of what was going on, because I read a lot of crits and I read a lot of articles about theatre and in general, although I didn't go to Equity meetings or anything like that, because they were entirely dominated for a very long time by the Worker's Revolutionary Party – Vanessa Redgrave and her lot and the Equity meetings used to be just, you know 'Point of order!', 'Point of order!' - they were well trained in disrupting meetings and they seemed to be a bit of a waste of time. Anyway in 19... At the end of that year, I got to understudy the same Brenda Bruce as Peter Pan [that] Christmas at the Scala Theatre off Tottenham Court Road. Now, this production of Peter Pan was still under the estate of J.M. Barrie and it had to be done exactly the same way as it'd always be done and I played one of the pirates and stood by to understudy Brenda Bruce, so had the odd rehearsal as Peter Pan. I think a lot of what I've said about theatre-folk went out the window for that. It was a horrible company! It was a – the whole thing was dominated by a dreadful man who was a leftover from the old J.M. Barrie days and he wasn't the director, but he was like… In the old days, when you

didn't have a director you had a sort of a stage director sort-of bloke, who didn't have the status of director, but took all the [understudy] rehearsals and made a terrible fuss if anybody did anything wrong. I remember him telling me during the rehearsal for the understudies 'Why can't you keep your head still? You're always moving your head around', and he was – he completely demolished me, he thought nothing at all of cutting people down to size. The boys in Peter Pan were all child actors – from places like the Italia Conti School, for child actors. All of them with almost nothing in the way of education and all of them seriously horrible! [laughing] They were disruptive and they hated each other, they fought and… it was a very unhappy company, except for Brenda Bruce herself, who was one of the nicest women in the whole world and kept herself quite aloof from all of this. In the company was James Donald who played Captain Hook and everybody disliked him. He used to keep himself very much to himself and [laughing] when [we] got to Bristol, at the Hippodrome, he walked out, just before the curtain went up, he simply walked out into the night and that was the end of his career, because he had quite a – mind you, I think he was hating the whole show so much, he was playing Captain Hook, but not I think Mr Darling... it was before the days they married up the parts of Mr Darling and Captain Hook. I don't think he played Mr Darling, I may be wrong about that, I must look it up, because I can remember who took over as Mr Darling... maybe Brian was not there at the beginning, maybe they divided the two parts after James Donald walked out. But anyway, it was a most unhappy tour... and when it was in London for several weeks, that was fine, because I could live at home and everything was fine. That... yes, that came after the Sonia Dresdel thing and then the most exciting thing happened in 1953. I went to meet a bloke who was casting Eliza Doolittle in a tour throughout America of Pygmalion, not My Fair Lady, Pygmalion. And I thought I did rather well at the audition at Spotlight.

CS: Because of your dark hair?

PF: No, no, because [they] thought I had some talent and you know... they acted like an unpaid agent. They were very, very good. I don't think I had an agent, I don't think I... [laughing] oh yes I did! I did have an agent. My mother went into a theatric – I told you she was stage [mad], she took a share in a theatrical agency, which was mostly for foreigners, a lot of famous foreign artists were booked through the agency and they sort of handled me and got me some very dubious jobs. I remember they got me a very lovely BBC radio job and I loved radio, oh! I thought radio was the greatest thing!

CS: How was that? Was it a lot different, because obviously people can't see you…

PF: Yes! It was lovely, because you were free to kind of imagine yourself and to change your voice and to not have to bother to learn the words and the people were great, there were some very well known... but unfortunately the producer fancied my body, [laughing] and I absolutely refused to let him have it, so I didn't get any more work from him.

CS: Oh, no!

PF: He was a very famous producer too... and you know in those days they weren't called directors, they were called producers.

CS: Oh.

PF: The word director didn't come in until... well I would guess the sixties, but it might have been the fifties.

PF: Yes, the next thing was this Eliza Doolittle thing. And the man who interviewed me was the head of the company, the artistic director of a company called the Dublin Players and it was a sort of mixture of ex- Abbey and Gate players from Dublin, who had been doing this tour of America for three or four years and always took Pygmalion, because it was the most popular. They were all meant to be Irish plays.

CS: Ah.

PF: [laughing] And it's a bit tenuous, Pygmalion, but at least George Bernard Shaw was Irish. But they took other Irish plays too, like Playboy of the Western World and a Seán O'Casey and something called Shadow and Substance and there were about five or six plays in the repertoire. Anyway I did the audition and heard nothing. Ronald Ibbs was the artistic director and he simply disappeared. And I kept phoning Spotlight and I said 'Do you know what's happening?' and they said, 'We think you've got the part, but we're not absolutely sure.' So I spent I should think it must have been three weeks to a month not knowing whether I was going to America for nine months! The tour was nine months, with a month rehearsing in Dublin. I could write a book about that whole episode of my life. It was extraordinary. I was this English girl, all the Irish absolutely hated anything English. [laughing] So I had a really, really hard time.

CS: [laughs] Oh no!

PF: So for the first 3 months, we didn't have a Higgins, except a man with the thickest Irish accent you could possibly imagine, who was totally unsuited for the part of Higgins - there was no proper understudy. So the whole thing started – I mean one member of the cast, a lovely character actress, suddenly swelled up, was sent home and died within a matter of days. She had some sort of ghastly internal cancer. Everything that could go wrong went wrong. I mean, in the end we sailed into blue water and I even got the cast to be friendly and respectful and it was alright in the end, but 9 months is a long time and we were touring like mad, sometimes 500 miles and then playing that night, or 500 miles and then 500 miles the next day, and then play that night. Oh, it was, yeah... I could write a book.

CS: What sort of size theatres? Did you go to big cities?

PF: Mostly university theatres, which were beautiful in the States... really, really lovely theatres. We played in Boys' Town, which [I knew of from] a film Spencer Tracy made, called Boys' Town. It was one of these... enormous sorts of schools for boys who had

criminal tendencies, were mentally retarded, all kinds of misfits. Lots of them, lots of them, hundreds of them! And we had to play for them. It was the weirdest experience ever, because most of them didn't pay attention and made very strange noises during the show, but it was all part of the experience. We played for all colours of the rainbow in all the states... 32 States we covered, 32 out of then 48, so it was a real growing up experience.

CS: What sort of reviews did you get?

PF: Oh, fine. I got freedom of the city of Minneapolis. We got – yeah, we got quite good reviews, but they didn't really... they weren't exactly sophisticates. The only place where we got really bad reviews was Washington DC, where they knew about good theatre.

CS: Yes.

PF: We never played New York, where they would have slaughtered us.

CS: [OK]

PF: It was all done very much on a shoestring; costumes and everything were quite unsuitable really.

CS: What sort of costumes did you have in weekly rep?

PF: Our own mostly, we had to produce our own wardrobes. It was one of the things in the contract... that you had to produce your own clothes. They didn't have a wardrobe as such. I mean, you know, they might sometimes produce something we might borrow from each other, but no, one had to be able to provide… because nearly everything was modern dress, so… we very rarely did a costume piece.

CS: Oh, OK that's good.

PF: Except Christmas Carol. And they might have a few skips; you know big wicker baskets full of clothes and props that they could produce if absolutely necessary. While I was in Dublin rehearsing, I met a producer – he was definitely called a producer – called Hugh Goldie, who was going to be taking over the direction of the Oxford Playhouse and the Oxford Playhouse was a big step up for me in terms of English Theatre, because it had a status, it was definitely… the show I did at the Arts was a good status thing and the Oxford Playhouse was going to be a really good status thing, and although they asked me to go back to play Eliza for a following year, once I got to Oxford, I said no… and that was two-weekly rep, was it or three-weekly rep? I think it was two-weekly rep…

CS: Oh, OK.

PF: But, what happened there was when the revolution in British Theatre happened.

CS: Oh.

PF: Dear Peter Hall appeared on the scene. He and his buddies from Cambridge graduated. One of the first jobs he did was to come direct and finally to take over the artistic directorship of the Oxford Playhouse and the Arts Theatre in London.

CS: Yes.

PF: And that man transformed British Theatre. He simply almost single-handedly… he had people like Peter Brook alongside him. And, you know some fantastic talents, but he was a doer. My husband absolutely loathed him, thought he was a totally incompetent director. My husband was at the Oxford Playhouse and it was where we got married. His name was Derek Francis and he'd been there with Ronnie Barker for 2 years.

CS: Yes.

PF: Ronnie Barker was our best man and… Peter Hall turned up green as the greenest grass you could imagine, but with an obvious talent. The word producer got replaced with director. I wouldn't be surprised if Peter was responsible for that. And the Oxford Playhouse suddenly had a whole mass of new people who came in. I'd been there for about, oh I don't know, two months I think when Peter arrived on the scene, when he brought people like Billie Whitelaw in. He didn't change the repertory very much, we did have a little bit more serious stuff, but I mean Shakespeare didn't turn up or anything like that.

CS: No, OK.

PF: We still had The Corn is Green, but Billie Whitelaw played one of the leads in that. The man who went on to head the Guildhall School of Music, Tony… oh, what was his name? Anyway things got quite exciting there and bit by bit Peter got rid of all the old guard. I left, Derek left. Ronnie Barker left a bit later because everybody absolutely adored Ronnie, they adored him, such a lovely man.

CS: What was he like as a person?

PF: Oh, just lovely, just lovely, so funny... clever without ever seeming to be clever. His father was a local taxi driver and drove me and my husband to our honeymoon cottage… belonging to the man who became one of the leads in It Ain't alf 'ot Mum.

CS: Ah.

PF: Donald Hewlett. And Trader Faulkner played opposite me… Trader, I was reading about Trader only this week. Oh, I tell you what was the most prestigious theatre in London, in England at that time and that was the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre and the Stratford on Avon Shakespeare seasons. And that was the sort of Mecca... that was the highest point you could achieve. I never got to the Royal Shakespeare Company. In fact after Oxford, I did a season with Derek [in Brighton] where he lived, a summer season, and I suddenly started for the first time ever to forget my lines. I'd know I had something to say and a great black, it was a nightmare, thing came towards me; 'I know I have something to say and I don't know what it is'. And it was because I was pregnant.

CS: Oh!

PF: And it altered all my physiology.

CS: Oh no.

PF: And I never wanted to act again after having that baby.

CS: Really? Never?

PF: Never, never, never again. And my husband did very well. He went straight into the Old Vic that autumn, under Michael Benthall and he took off....

CS: What sort of plays was your husband in at the Old Vic?

PF: Nearly all Shakespeare, in fact I can't remember a play that wasn't Shakespeare. He started playing - not quite a spear-carrier, but almost! - in Julius Caesar in the autumn of… wait a minute, I've got to get this right… it must have been '57. We were married in '54… the first baby came in '56… oh yes! And then we moved from Brighton, where his great aunt lived. And she bought us a house in London.

CS: Oh!

PF: Four thousand pounds it cost. In Barnes, but we were so lucky! We looked after her until she died. She was in her late eighties, but she bought us a house, I mean we never had to worry about a mortgage.

CS: Wow!

PF: Four-bedroomed house with a garage and a gorgeous garden, in Barnes! Unbelievable! Anyway, from there he could much more easily go to Waterloo than he could from Brighton… From the very small part in Julius Caesar, in which he obviously did extremely well – from there, he just got better and better and better parts with some wonderful directors like Tyrone Guthrie and Peter Brook, with wonderful actors he played with John Gielgud and oh, too many to remember…

CS: Did he like Peter Brook as a person? Or did he like working with him?

PF: Yes, yes, he didn't really understand the intellectual approach to theatre, he was definitely born of the repertory system, but where he was a genius was in makeup.

CS: Oh.

PF: He went to the Brighton School of Art and he was an artist and a craftsman and he changed to wanting to act while he was at the School of Art, where Ralph Richardson also went. Now Ralph Richardson was also a miracle worker with makeup. And Derek was equally good… Ronnie Barker in his autobiography refers to him as 'the man of a thousand faces'. And he had a ball with makeup, absolute ball. Everything from eyebrows to noses to cheeks to... he made his own wigs sometimes. He was very well known in all the wig-makers. But theatre was changing quite rapidly then. We'd had this amazing season with Olivier and Richardson, just after the war… which anybody who has anything to do with it remembers, it was at the New Theatre.

[Tape is paused]

PF: It was so strange that this passion to act, which I'd had ever since was a child simply faded away when I had my first baby. And he just went from strength to strength and he was at the Old Vic for 4 years and he ended playing Tartuffe in the Molière, so you can see the trajectory from the kind of spear-carrier in Julius Caesar to Tartuffe was pretty steep… and then he simply was grabbed by television and did one after another, after another, after another. There were only 2 channels I think then… and he was – I mean he was there at the birth of recording tape and colour and everything.

CS: How did he find the difference between live television and recorded television?

PF: Well it was a great deal less frightening, but he wasn't there very long before you were able to have retakes, but they were very expensive in the first days and you weren't popular at all if you were inclined to need retakes. I don't think he had any big

problems about it. It's interesting that he had to tone his acting from major Shakespeare in a major theatre down to the television camera and apparently did it without any trouble at all. I never heard him speak about it even. And after that, I started to get bothered, because it seemed to me that he was doing less and less interesting work on television. There was a Shakespeare series, for which he wasn't asked, there were – I mean – he was in the Forsyte Saga and lots of those series. I made a lot of money out of the Forsyte Saga, it was amazing. The contracts were changed after that and the residuals became very much less. But the Forsyte Saga was extraordinary. And then I started to get bothered, because he was doing more and more things like Frankie Howerd in Up Pompeii and working with Dick Emery and doing a lot more of what I call rubbish. And he thoroughly enjoyed [them all]. He said 'I'm just in this business for enjoyment, I'm not interested in the snobby stuff', but it got to the stage when even his agent said 'Look, I think it's time you did some stage work' and then he went back and did a Simon Gray play and he did Shylock at the Young Vic and he did one or two really nice things on the boards – and suddenly he started getting offers for really good dramatic parts [on telly]. And that's sad, because that was right at the end of his life. He died in '84 and in the meantime, in about 19... yes in 1961, or it might have been 1960 he was doing a series on television called The Six Proud Walkers, which was a very unusual 13-part serial, not series, serial. And it had the most wonderful actors in it like Tony Britton and Jackie Hill and oh… I can't remember - Andrew Sachs - who's been in the news recently. And it was a wonderful, wonderful cast and… then suddenly he said he was going to do a puppet show for one of our kids for their birthdays, and the puppet show turned into an epic, major, major epic, it took over our whole sitting room. We did it with string marionettes, which are amongst the most difficult to do. I had to operate. I was responsible for the choice of music, which we recorded with some very good actors from The Six Proud Walkers. I now absolutely hate puppet performances with recorded voices, but never mind, you have to start somewhere… and one thing lead to another and suddenly we decided there wasn't any room in the house for this puppet theatre, we'd have to build one in the garden. So he built [one], his great aunt died, left him a little money in '61, and we built this gorgeous little theatre, little brick-built theatre in the garden. And he did it up like Covent Garden... on a shoestring, but nevertheless, you know – all sort of gilt and velour and 30 seats. And that was the beginning of the end for me. I just fell in love with puppetry and puppeteers and they started to come and see the show. It was just a hobby it was…

CS: Is that when you first started? Had you had any experience with puppetry before?

PF: Absolutely none, I loathed the things. I was frightened of them as a child. Punch and Judy: yuck! Anyway I really started to discover that there were real, real artists among the puppeteers, there were a whole new breed of puppeteers coming up in the sixties and I decided that I would like to get involved, so I started work with some colleagues on the founding of a national centre for puppetry, which would be the sort of advocacy, focal point for learning about puppetry and advocating puppetry, publicising puppetry and insisting that puppetry was an art form, a performing art in its own right and we were very successful, very successful and of course my acting skills came in very useful as acting skills always do. I was able to raise a lot of money for the centre, to the fury of the old-fashioned puppeteers, who said 'we never got any subsidy.' They didn't get any subsidy because they were lousy, that's why. There was so much dreadful puppetry! There's very little of it left now, except amongst the amateurs. We have our apotheosis in War Horse at the National, it's the most superb example of puppetry ever, that's because they threw so much money and time at it and puppetry needs money and time,

but I've done a couple of Platform performances at the National, so I still take the stage occasionally. And of course, when you're lecturing – I became a lecturer in 1992 at Central. They adopted puppetry and so I was the puppetry teacher. So giving a good lecture, you have to be theatrical, it's no good... the number of lecturers who mumble along on one note is just terrifying, I expect you meet them in Sheffield too!

CS: [laughs]

PF: No, to be a good lecturer, you've got to show enthusiasm and variety of tone...Oh God, you're recording all this; it's not really part of your piece.

CS: It's fine.

PF: Is there anything else you want me to...?

CS: Why do you think puppetry is so important in adult theatre?

PF: It's – The animation of figures and objects are as old as civilisation itself. It is simply part of us, animism, the seeing of life in objects and in dolls and in figures is something we all do, we play with our dolls as children and bring them to life and get them to talk to us, it's an instinct and it's a mixture of craft and fine art and in the case of theatre, theatre… on screen in cinemas and on television, puppetry is everywhere, it's just everywhere. But on stage in the [early] twentieth century, it suddenly became nothing more, or almost nothing more than an expression of craft; how well you could make your puppet move, you know how beautifully it was put together, articulated and all the rest of it. And nobody worried about the content of the shows, which were an insult to the intelligence of a four-year old most of them. And of course there was no training of any kind except as… people just sprung up and said 'I'm a puppeteer, I'm going to be a puppeteer.' And you know you go to a show and think 'Christ, never let me see another puppet show as long as I live.' Because they were so awful! Even my husband got to the stage, where he said 'just don't take me to any more puppet shows please',

CS: Yeah, aha!

PF: ...because they were so awful, but then this new [artists] breed started to come in and for children's work and for adult work suddenly… it was magic, what they had to show was just magic. Very difficult, very expensive, but nevertheless, just hypnotic and with a theatrical power that is just extraordinary… Have you seen War Horse?

CS: No, but…

PF: Oh, you must see War Horse! It's the most astonishing piece of theatre! And at the centre of it are puppets that don't speak and they are the horses. It's just beautiful… and

it's transferring to the West End, it's going to be at the New London Theatre from March. It's already had two long record-breaking runs at the National Theatre. Broken every box-office record there was there. And it's the puppetry. It's just seeing these things that you know perfectly well are not alive. You see them brought to life by the puppeteers and you're just… you're just riveted. You put an actor, a child and a puppet on stage and the audience will focus on the puppet. Animal next, child next and the actor last. And it's just proved all the time. And I just thought 'for Christ sake, theatre's missing out on one of its most powerful tools.'

CS: Yes.

PF: And so bit by bit we sort of built respect for it… it has a lot of respect for most theatre makers, it's another tool in the toolbox, you know?

CS: Yes.

PF: But the best companies, like Complicite and Kneehigh and Improbable, they all use it, so I'm delighted it has been recognised for the wonderful thing that it can be, not always it, but can be. So are you answered?

CS: I think… just one last question. How do you think theatre has changed since when you were acting to now?

PF: Well of course, it's so much – since the censorship, it's so much more daring, it confronts every possible theme in our daily lives, in our dream lives, in our sexual lives… every single… there's nothing that it doesn't tackle. And that of course is absolutely… the importance, as I was saying before, of the designer, the importance of what you see, not what you hear has changed enormously, especially I would say in opera, where I will frequently go because of the designer, rather than the singers, just to see what they've done. And you have designers like the Quay brothers, who started off as puppeteers, doing wonderful stuff in [opera and] movies. And those are the two major changes I think… the content of the performances and the importance of the visual aspect of the performances. In fact, nearly all actors are trained now. Mind you, that hasn't got rid of some very, very bad acting! Especially amongst young women actors, I've see some shockers in places like the National too and the Young Vic. It's always the young women who seem to be so weak. And God knows there must be millions of them to choose from. And then every now and then you get one who's just wonderful, sticks out like a sore thumb. Eileen Atkins and Maggie Smith were at the Oxford Playhouse when I was there.

CS: Wow!

PF: They were ASMs. Maggie went from there to variety and review and Eileen Atkins went straight into serious theatre and made her mark on the most extraordinary production of The Killing of Sister George. Now that was the first play about lesbianism,

I think that was a major, major, major success. Eileen was splendid, fantastic performance, very, very nuanced. And anyway I'm still a theatre addict, I go to everything, I go… sometimes I go to dance, not often, but I go to opera and I go to avant-garde stuff and I go to – down the middle of the road stuff – you'll even see me at – you won't see me at Alan Ayckbourn very often nowadays, but I'll certainly be at anything by Tom Stoppard and I do admire the great actors.

CS: Who are your favourite actors?

PF: Well there are quite a few, Simon Russell Beale I adore, Judi Dench I adore, who doesn't? Who else do I go for? I go for writers very often without really knowing the actors, but you know when you're put on the spot, you can't think of…

CS: What playwrights then?

PF: Well certainly Stoppard… I love the exotics, I love Lorca, but Lorca was puppet mad, so that's probably why. I love some of the Germans that the National puts on. And I've sort of dried up… I can't think of any names anymore, but I've seen some fabulous performances. I do go to the National a lot especially since the previous artistic director of BAC is now associate director at the National and I think it's turned its choice of plays around very much and they're doing things by Kneehigh and War Horse and really, really 'Total Theatre' things that I admire hugely and that's mainly because of Tom Morris. He's got a new play that he's [directing], Complicité, has got a new play coming to the Barbican so I'll go to anything Simon McBurney is connected with and I think that the Bite seasons at the Barbican have just been fantastic. There's a very famous puppeteer coming there called Ronnie Burkett. Canadian, he's there in March. He's extraordinary, string marionettes, and there's a lot of international stuff that I love and of course, the London International Mime festival is starting in a few days and that is the high spot of the year for me, theatrically. There'll be some really fascinating shows and several with puppets. One from Germany called Salto Lamento, sort of macabre, very, very camp, Day of the Dead sort of huge puppets.

CS: Do you think audiences have changed a lot over the years?

PF: Well I think it's marvellous how they're trying so hard to get young people in. I mean, you know the average West End price of £25-35 for a good seat is impossible! But the National has this Travelex season, Bite has occasional very, very good prices for concessions for the young… operas have some very good prices for, especially for the young, and… so I do think the audiences for theatre, if it's the right kind of theatre are much ,much younger and more keen. For instance BAC led the way, Tom Morris with theatre for the young and to see them queuing up for the stuff at BAC really does your heart good. It's all new work. Do you ever go there? BAC?

CS: No…

PF: They have some very good stuff. I don't go so often since Tom left, there's something about his touch that I really admire. I don't go very often to theatres like the Richmond theatre or the, you know the places where they're still producing rather middle of the road work for middle of the road people, who used to be the backbone of theatre. I prefer more experimental stuff. Not too experimental, but slightly experimental.

CS: All right, do you want to leave it there then?

PF: Yes.